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BROWNING, SCHOPENHAUER, AND MUSIC

BY WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

No one can express either in spoken or written words the effect produced upon him by the greatest music, because pure music is a language of its own, the only approach to a universal language through sound that humanity has ever known, and quite untranslatable by pencil or by pen. It is perhaps the greatest of all the arts, because it speaks to us with a direct force and with a hint of infinite meaning entirely beyond the range of painting, poetry, sculpture, and architecture. The fact that when we try to explain even in our own thoughts how "music makes us feel" we are immediately baffled, is perhaps in itself an indication that music penetrates deeper than the foundations of speech. Many philosophers and poets have nevertheless attempted the task, but the only representative of each class that has even shadowed the truth is, among the philosophers, Schopenhauer; and among the poets, Robert Browning. Each of these twain had studied the theory of music, and each was fond of playing an instrument, Schopenhauer the flute, and Browning the piano.

In spite of the fact that the father of Browning's mother was the son of a German, and that Browning had travelled through the most picturesque parts of Germany, and that he was familiar with the best things in German literature, his poems show few traces of German influence. Next to England, Italy and France were the countries he loved, and his work abounds in French and Italian literary and topographical allusions; Germany and the Germans seem to have aroused little curiosity and to have given him little inspiration. So far as I know, his poetry makes no explicit reference to the teachings of Arthur Schopenhauer. From time to time we find a contemptuous thrust at the doctrine of

pessimism, as in the poem, *At the Mermaid*, where he ridicules *Weltschmerz*; but I can recall no passage containing anything like an acknowledgment of Schopenhauer's influence. Yet Browning's philosophy of music, as expressed particularly in *Abt Vogler* and in *Charles Avison* is surprisingly similar to that stated definitely by Schopenhauer in his master-work, *The World as Will and Idea* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*).

Schopenhauer's book was published in 1819, and its author believed he had written a work of original genius, destined to have a prodigious and permanent influence in all parts of the world. For twenty years it suffered as total neglect as any printed page could find; but not for one moment did its author lose faith in it or in himself. About 1840 it emerged from oblivion, and in 1844 Schopenhauer at last succeeded in persuading a publisher to issue a new and enlarged edition. From that time to his death in 1860, Schopenhauer enjoyed the sweets of fame, and today the width of his influence in thought and in literature can hardly be overestimated. We may not like him, but we shall never be rid of him. In the 'eighties, his book was admirably translated into English by R. B. (now Lord) Haldane, assisted by Mr. Kemp; and it is not at all impossible that Browning read the English version with some interest and profit, for *Charles Avison* was published in 1887. It is probable, however, that Browning had studied Schopenhauer in the original before 1855.

Schopenhauer was the greatest pessimist, and Browning the greatest optimist, of the nineteenth century; yet they both believed that behind all the phenomena of existence—originating, controlling, supporting, and driving all things that appear to the senses—was the supreme force, the ultimate reality, which both called Will. To Schopenhauer this Immanent Will (as in Thomas Hardy's *Dynasts*) was Unconscious, totally unlike anything commonly called Providence. To Robert Browning (as to Lotze) the Immanent Will was not only intelligent, but it was Conscious Love. Schopenhauer attempted to account for the superiority of music over all the other arts, and for its profounder significance to humanity, by insisting that poetry, painting, sculpture and architecture belonged to the world of "idea" (*Vorstellung*), but that music was the direct expression of the Will. Browning, so far as his dramatic poetry may be

taken as a revelation of his own meaning,—and we may without doubt be justified in taking *Abt Vogler* and *Charles Avison* in that fashion,—believed that painting, poetry, sculpture and architecture were the results of human effort; but that music came straight from the divine source. Thus when we see the Sistine Madonna, or read *Hamlet*, we admire the extraordinary power of Rafael, of Shakespeare. But when we hear the Ninth Symphony, we are truly listening to the voice of God. Beethoven was more passive than active, the channel through which flowed the Divine Will.

Schopenhauer's philosophy of music is stated toward the close of the third book of the first volume of *The World as Will and Idea*, and I make no apology for lengthy extracts, as the subject is of the deepest interest and importance to all lovers of music:

It stands alone, quite cut off from all the other arts. In it we do not recognize the copy or repetition of any Idea of existence in the world. Yet it is such a great and exceedingly noble art, its effect on the inmost nature of man is so powerful, and it is so entirely and deeply understood by him in his inmost consciousness as a perfectly universal language, the distinctness of which surpasses even that of the perceptible world itself. . . . Music is thus by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the Will itself*, whose objectivity the Ideas are. This is why the effect of music is so much more powerful and penetrating than that of the other arts, for they speak only of shadows, but it speaks of the thing itself. . . . The composition of melody, the disclosure in it of all the deepest secrets of human willing and feeling, is the work of genius, whose action, which is more apparent here than anywhere else, lies far from all reflection and conscious intention, and may be called an inspiration. . . . 'The composer reveals the inner nature of the world, and expresses the deepest wisdom in a language which his reason does not understand; as a person under the influence of mesmerism tells things of which he has no conception when he awakes. Therefore in the composer, more than in any other artist, the man is entirely separated and distinct from the artist. . . . The *Adagio* speaks of the pain of a great and noble effort which despises all trifling happiness. But how wonderful is the effect of the *minor* and *major*! How astounding that the change of half a tone, the entrance of a minor third instead of a major [note Browning's *Toccata of Galuppi's*] at once and inevitably forces upon us an anxious and painful feeling, and from which again we are just as instantaneously delivered by the major. . . . But it must never be forgotten, in the investigation of all these analogies I have pointed out, that music has no direct, but merely an indirect relation to them, for it never expresses the phenomenon, but only the inner nature, the in-itself of all phenomena, the will itself. It does not therefore express this or that particular and definite joy, this or that sorrow, or pain, or horror, or delight, or merri-ment, or peace of mind; but joy, sorrow, pain, horror, delight, merri-

ment, peace of mind *themselves*, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without accessories, and therefore without their motives. Yet we completely understand them in this extracted quintessence. Hence it arises that our imagination is so easily excited by music, and now seeks to give form to that invisible yet actively moved spirit-world which speaks to us directly, and clothe it with flesh and blood, *i. e.*, to embody it in an analogous example. This is the origin of the song with words, and finally of the opera, the text of which should therefore never forsake that subordinate position in order to make itself the chief thing and the music a mere means of expressing it, which is a great misconception and a piece of utter perversity; for music always expresses only the quintessence of life and its events, never these themselves, and therefore their differences do not always affect it . . . if music is too closely united to the words, and tries to form itself according to the events, it is striving to speak a language which is not its own. . . . The unutterable depth of all music, by virtue of which it floats through our consciousness as the vision of a paradise firmly believed in yet ever distant from us, and by which also it is so fully understood and yet so inexplicable, rests on the fact that it restores to us all the emotions of our inmost nature, but entirely without reality and far removed from their pain. So also the seriousness which is essential to it, which excludes the absurd from its direct and peculiar province, is to be explained by the fact that its object is not the idea, with reference to which alone deception and absurdity are possible; but its object is directly the will, and this is essentially the most serious of all things, for it is that on which all depends.

Observe Schopenhauer's remarks about dance-music: the digression and deviation from the key-note, "not only to the harmonious intervals of the third and dominant, but to every tone, to the dissonant sevenths and to the superfluous degrees; yet there always follows a constant return to the key-note. . . . Dance-music in the minor seems to indicate the failure of that trifling happiness which we ought rather to despise"—all this seems to be echoed by Browning in *A Toccata of Galuppi's*:

What? Those lesser thirds so plaintive, sixths diminished, sigh on sigh,
Told them something? Those suspensions, those solutions—"Must we
die?"

Those commiserating sevenths—"Life might last! we can but try!"

"Were you happy?"—"Yes."—"And are you still as happy?"—"Yes.
And you?"

—"Then, more kisses!"—"Did I stop them, when a million seemed
too few?"

Hark, the dominant's persistence till it must be answered to!

So, an octave struck the answer.

If Browning had read Schopenhauer in the original, as

is by no means unlikely, these technical allusions in *A Toccata* seem to me a reminiscence of the German philosopher's remarks on dance-music, for this particular poem was published in 1855, when Schopenhauer's fame was spreading rapidly over Europe. But it is not with superficial references or echoes of detail that I am impressed, but by the fact that the philosophy of music set forth in *Abt Vogler* (1864) and in *Charles Avison* (1887) is identical with that of Schopenhauer—always remembering that Browning's conception of the Ultimate Will is of something conscious and intentional, rather than of something unconscious and purposeless; in other words, Christian rather than atheistic. The musician *Abt Vogler* has just been extemporising, and he knows that he has been divinely inspired:

All through my keys that gave their sounds to a wish of my soul,
 All through my soul that praised as its wish flowed visibly forth,
 All through music and me! For think, had I painted the whole,
 Why, there it had stood, to see, nor the process so wonder-worth:
 Had I written the same, made verse,—still, effect proceeds from cause,
 Ye know why the forms are fair, ye hear how the tale is told;
 It is all triumphant art, but art in obedience to laws,
 Painter and poet are proud in the artist-list enrolled:—

But here is the finger of God, a flash of the will that can,
 Existent behind all laws, that made them, and, lo, they are!
 And I know not if, save in this, such gift be allowed to man,
 That out of three sounds he frame, not a fourth sound, but a
 star. . . .

Sorrow is hard to bear, and doubt is slow to clear,
 Each sufferer says his say, his scheme of the weal and woe;
 But God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
 The rest may reason and welcome; 't is we musicians know.

In *Charles Avison*, Browning again makes a distinction between music and all the other arts, which brings to the memory the distinction made by Schopenhauer. The other arts, says Browning, express the intellectual effort of man; music expresses something deeper, something impossible to fix definitely, man's Soul, and hence, the universal Soul:

There is no truer truth obtainable
 By Man than comes of music. "Soul"—(accept
 A word which vaguely names what no adept
 In word-use fits and fixes so that still
 Thing shall not slip word's fetter and remain
 Innominate as first, yet, free again,
 Is no less recognized the absolute

Fact underlying that same other fact
 Concerning which no cavil can dispute
 Our nomenclature when we call it "Mind"—
 Something not Matter—"Soul," who seeks shall find
 Distinct beneath that something. You exact
 An illustrative image? This may suit.

We see a work: the worker works behind,
 Invisible himself. Suppose his act
 Be to o'erarch a gulf: he digs, transports,
 Shapes and, through enginery—all sizes, sorts,
 Lays stone by stone until a floor compact
 Proves our bridged causeway. So works Mind—by stress
 Of faculty, with loose facts, more or less,
 Builds up our solid knowledge: all the same,
 Underneath rolls what Mind may hide not tame,
 An element which works beyond our guess,
 Soul, the unsounded sea—whose lift of surge,
 Spite of all superstructure, lets emerge,
 In flower and foam, Feeling from out the deeps
 Mind arrogates no mastery upon—
 Distinct indisputably. . . .

To match and mate

Feeling with knowledge,—make as manifest
 Soul's work as Mind's work, turbulence as rest,
 Hates, loves, joys, woes, hopes, fears, that rise and sink
 Ceaselessly. . . .
 How we Feel, hard and fast as what we Know—
 This were the prize and is the puzzle!—which ,
 Music essays to solve. . . .
 Could Music rescue thus from Soul's profound,
 Give feeling immortality by sound,
 Then, were she queenliest of arts!

Whether Browning deliberately took his philosophy of music from Schopenhauer, or developed it independently, I cannot say; but the resemblance is interesting. And we know that Browning loved to take pessimistic speculation and give it an optimistic interpretation.

WILLIAM LYON PHELPS.